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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how the analysis of works by women writers can be used to help students explore their own values and feelings concerning sexism. It first presents a teacher-written dialogue in which a woman accuses a man of making a sexist remark and describes the lively class discussion engendered by the reading of the dialogue. It then recounts class members' reactions to two poems by Marge Piercy depicting the effects on women of negative societal attitudes toward them and shows how an instructor can help students make connections between the feelings expressed in the poems and their own experiences and attitudes. Through the process of literary analysis both male and female students can be helped to understand the need for "unlearning" and challenging sexist patterns. (GW)

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Unlearning to Not Speak: Feminism in the Classroom

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"Scrambled eggs. Think you can handle it?"

The girl in the adjacent booth looks up, looks at the counter girl, looks around at the voice.

"Why did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"Think you can handle it?"

"Why? What do you mean?"

The girl at the counter stiffens, hands scrambling.

"That was a put down. A sexist put down."

"Come off it!"

"No, really. Listen to me for a minute . . . ."

"Hey lady, get off my back. She's a friend. We kid around."

"It doesn't matter. You're putting her . . . ."

From the counter, "Wait a minute. He is a friend. It's . . . ."

"Yeah, everything's so serious all of a sudden. Sexist this and sexist that. Shit. Can't even get your eggs scrambled without a lecture.

* * * * * *

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Towards the end of the semester in my introductory class in women writers I handed out copies of the above dialogue-- with no comments and no identifying information. I asked for responses. Most of the students felt that it was an open and shut case. The women in the booth had clearly overreacted.

"After all, the boy and the counter girl were friends. What right had the other girl to butt in?"

Some of them remarked that they really couldn't be certain how they felt, that there was not enough information for them to know exactly what was going on.

One woman, mid-thirties, closer to my age than to that of the students, said she wondered whether there was ever enough information for us to know exactly what was going on and went on to say she thought she understood the reaction of the girl in the dialogue, would probably have felt the same way herself, but doubted whether she would have had enough nerve to say anything.

That intrigued me. I had written the piece, transcribed it rather--the first line from actuality, the rest from the imaginary conversation played out in my head after I "said" what I also hadn't had the nerve to say. I had saved it, thinking it might make a useful exercise.

"What about the girl behind the counter? How do you feel about her? I asked.

Most felt sorry for her because she was caught in the middle and embarassed by the whole situation.

"Isn't there any chance she was grateful for someone coming to her aid?" I tried to ask the question with some lightness to camouflage my manipulation. I must not have succeeded.

"You were the girl in the next booth, weren't you?"
one of the men asked delighted with his probable discovery.

I was silent.

And a woman pointed out that the details didn't support my interpretation, because the girl didn't stiffen at the guy's remarks to her but only at the other girl's.

There was some disagreement about the tone of the opening remark,

but most felt that it was an appropriate opener, and discounted my suggestion that it might have been condescending. They were pretty sure, in fact, that it had been meant humorously.

"He was just kidding around, making conversation."

One girl said that members of her family talked to each other like that all the time and that when a third member interrupted, there was hell to pay. "Don't butt in," it seems was a very strong impulse among my individualistic students, male and female. And I wondered what that meant for loving one's neighbor as oneself, to say nothing of what it meant for sisterhood.

"Would it have made a difference if they hadn't been friends?" I asked.

There was some acknowledgement that it might have made a difference, but it was clear that, for most of the students, the friendship only made something already bad worse, pointing out and defining sharply the inappropriateness which would have been there regardless.

"She had no business intruding," a woman said.

"It was none of her goddamn business," the most outspoken male in the class added, and others beside myself stiffened at the barely sublimated violence.

The woman who had earlier said she could identify with the impulse of the girl in the booth spoke, broadening the focus. She reminded us of a discussion we were having at the end of the last class period, stimulated by Marge Piercy's Small Changes (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications. Inc., 1972), a discussion that could be summarized by the title "But How Do We Get Here From There?" How do we use our own growth to effect the growth of others?

"If we don't say the things that need saying nothing will ever change," she said passionately. "We can't keep smiling benevolently at the outrages around us. Even gritting our teeth isn't enough. You can't walk by the house of the wife-beater and stick your fingers in your ears to drown out the screams. That woman in the restaurant is saying, 'Stop. Look what you're doing. Listen to what you are saying and what it means.' " She paused. "Am I overreacting?"

No, I thought, definitely not.

"No," I said, "I don't think so."

And I moved us on, preferring to avoid direct confrontation among students in favor of eventual shocks of recognition within.

I asked how they responded to the fact that the boy didn't let the waitress finish her remarks at the end.

A woman student smiled, seeming to be happy that I had asked about something she had noticed.

"I didn't like that," she offered. "I just don't think the guy had much respect for that girl; he didn't really think she had much of a head."

"I disagree," a male student followed. "He had every right in the world to interrupt; after all, it was him being attacked, not her."

"He wasn't being attacked, he was being quiestioned." I suggested.

The young man didn't respond.

A young woman who rarely spoke seemed anxious to. I assumed she was going to come to my aid.

"But I don't think he <u>was</u> interrupting her. If he were, I think there would have been dashes, not dots, after 'It's.' I think the dots indicate that she had already paused, unsure of what she was going to say. I think she was embarrassed and that he was helping her out."

Some students nodded. Others grimaced.

I was amused, gratified, and amazed by the close reading the short text was eliciting.

"That's not what I meant the dots to indicate," I almost said, blowing my cover, so strong is the need to justify one's own work, but I contented myself with wondering how I might have avoided the ambiguity and whether "close reading" increases with the degree of importance the reader puts on unlocking meaning, or even, on unlocking a particular meaning.

"I just don't see what you want a guy to say to a girl?" The young man was addressing me directly. "Sometimes I think you think everything is sexist. Maybe she was pretty? Maybe he wanted to ask her out and he was leading up to it? Can't a guy even kid around anymore? Can't anyone kid around anymore?"

The question was an important one, one which we'd been asking ourselves throughout the semester in a variety of contexts and which needed to be dealt with. Was there room in the same movement--in the same person--for anger and laughter? Which was appropriate when? Where? I asked that we hold the question temporarily, promising to return to it.

I then left the dialogue and moved to some poems from Marge Piercy's To Be Of Use (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1973). The poems were angry. I began with "What You Waited For"

You called yourself a dishwater blond,

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How long will she wait for change?

"What do you think of this poem?"

"Very realistic," the young man who had been most annoyed said immediately. "I like it very much."

"Do you see any similarities with the dialogue?"

He continued, "Yes, some, but it's much better, much clearer. I know exactly how I' m supposed to feel. The poet is showing me something I might have missed without her."

"What about the characters? Do you find any similarities between the waitresses? Does having read the second piece make any of you rethink your responses to the first?"

"It's the same woman," one of the female students said.

That went a little farther than I had anticipated, but I had no time to interrupt.

"It's always the same woman or could just as well be. That's what the poem is saying."

Indeed it was and I decided to broaden the base of the discussion by unearthing possible connections with students' own lives.

"How many of you have ever worked as waiters or waitresses?"

"Do bartenders count?"

"Sure."

About ten students raised their hands.

"What's it like?"

Laughter at shared misfortunes.

"It depends what kind of place you work in, whether the people who come in think they're ever going to see you again. Places on the road--like in the poem--those are the worst. The waitresses are really treated badly there," the young man paused. "I know. I've done it too."

I was fascinated by his choice of tense, leaving us in limbo between definite past and possible present.

"One of the things you do," he continued, "is to put ketchup on the underside of the coin you leave as a tip; then when she scoops it off the counter . . . ." He demonstrated, and laughed a little laugh. The air got heavy.

"Why is that funny?" I asked, trying not to let my tone reveal the full depth of my feeling.

"I don't know," he answered. I thought he sounded embarrassed, confused, and he didn't ask, "Can't anyone kid around anymore?"

Another woman who rarely speaks in class spoke up angrily. "It doesn't depend at all on the kind of place you work in. I've worked in them all. Dives and ritzy places. "It's all the same. It's always the same. You're treated like shit. And what's worse you're not supposed to

complain about it; it comes with the job. One place that I worked, the boss told me before I began that unless one of the customers actually molested me or used foul language, I shouldn't bother complaining to him?"

"And you took the job?"

"Not for very long."

"I still don't see what all the fuss is about," a young man who hadn't spoken added. "That's what those jobs are like; you take it or leave it."

"But what about those who can't take it or leave it? What about those who need the money and can't get it any other way? And what about the fact that 'those' include more women than men?"

It was the woman who had asked earlier whether she had been over-reacting. I thought she was right on again, and so did many of the others.

"You can always make the connections," someone said admiringly.

Though clearly not everyone was ready for them.

"I still think it depends on the kind of place it is. Take the Dog House, for instance, (a 24-hour hot dog place). I was there the other night and I was treating the waitresses real nice. In fact the other guys were telling me to come off it, but I felt good and I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't be nice." (I wondered how he felt on the nights when he put ketchup on quarters. For it was the same young man.) "But then a bunch of other guys came in, and they were pretty tough and started putting the waitress down real bad."

"What did you do then?"

"Are you crazy? I didn't do anything. Those guys were mean. I wasn't going to stick my neck out. Just like I don't think that girl in the first story should have butted in. Not if she knew what was good for her."

"Do you mean you were afraid?"

"Yeah, I was afraid, and so would you be afraid."

"But what if I wasn't? What if the girl wasn't?"

"Well, she should have been. Now at Ernie's Esquire, it might be a different story."

"Ernie's Esquire?" I was sure he was putting me on, mischievously creating the archetypal kitsch restautant.

"Yeah, Ernie's Esquire, the fanciest place in Wheeling. It's where all the big shots go. A place for the special girl on the special night. You know."

I wasn't sure I did. Not really, but maybe enough to get his point.

"In what way is Ernie's different?"

"Well, if one of the waitresses there was being given a hard time, I'd say something."

"You would?" I was really confused. "I thought you said you wouldn't butt in."

"Well not if there was a risk of getting my head knocked off. But Ernie's is different. All the cops hang around there and they all know my dad. He's a lawyer in town."

"You mean at Ernie's you're not afraid."

"Yeah, that's right."

Maybe I was just imagining, but I thought I heard clicking all around the room, the clicking of sudden connections. Theory made fact. Ideas embodied. So it all comes down to fear. And to power, what we do depending on what we are not afraid to do.

I saw a woman's hand that had been up only once before during the semester. Though most people had stopped raising their hands when they wanted to speak, others still felt more comfortable when I called on them. In fact some of the latter group had spoken to me about it early in the semester; they told me they understood that I was trying to break down the usual formal barrier, but they felt that their training had been so good, they couldn't quite bring themselves "to interrupt," even when they had something they wanted very badly to say. They asked whether I couldn't help them for a while, by calling on them. And I was reminded how important it is to respect the different rhythms of human growth.

I recognized the girl who hardly spoke, and who began cautiously.

"It's really funny that we're talking about all this today. It makes me think of something that happened this summer that I've hardly spoken about to anyone. I worked at one of those busy restaurants at

the ocean, and one of the girls who worked with me was really a little slow. She was very well-meaning, but she just couldn't get the hang of things, and was always stumbling and spilling and dropping. She was also younger than the the rest of us and quite shy. Well, one day she came to me in tears. A man at one of her tables had told her to come out with him after she got off work and he'd show her to do things right. She was very upset. Really hurt. I went over to the man and spoke to him very softly and very slowly and very firmly, and he apologized to me over and over and he left that girl a big tip that night, and whenever he came back with his friends,--and he came back often--he was always polite."

We had all been very attentive during her story.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that he was treating that girl as if he had forgotten that she was a human being, with feelings just like his, and he had said, confused, ashamed, 'I didn't realize.'"

"That's really 'woman as object.'" someone exclaimed.

"But she did something about it. She said something and it made a difference."

Into the vigorous atmosphere that enveloped the class, I introduced "Unlearning To Not Speak": (See page 5 for reference information)

Blizzards of paper

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"That's great," our angry, ketchup man said when I had finished.

I was really stunned. He had been so annoyed with the girl in the dialogue and when we had read Carolyn Kizer's poetry earlier in the semester, he had hated it. Piercy's anger seemed even less modulated than Kizer's. I was curious.

"Why do you like this if you disliked Carolyn Kizer so much?"

He stopped to think. This young man was totally unpredictable. An unconscious challenger of shibboleths and stereotypes. A fraternity man in love with poetry. A chauvinist who sometimes listened and sometimes heard.

"I'm not sure, but I think I know. In these poems, the poet shows me why she is angry. She doesn't just spew forth at me; she explains and I can understand."

People all around, men and women, nodded vigorously. He had clearly said something which whatever its particular accuracy as regarded Kizer and Piercy (and I think part of the trouble with Kizer was that some of the students got lost in her allusions and so could not follow the "explanation" of the anger) had broken things wide open for many of the students.

We were coming to the end of the class, and I wanted to conclude with a piece of my own, recently written, and touching, I hoped on many of the issues we had been discussing, including the relationship of anger and laughter. "She Who Laughs First . . . ." was based on the difficulties I had dealing with several male colleagues who, late one afternoon, asked why I wasn't home cooking dinner for my family.

We discussed the piece briefly.

"I like that for the same reason that Ron likes the Piercy poems," one woman remarked. "You explain what made you angry, why you did what you did and said what you said and didn't say what you didn't say."

I shared what one of my female colleagues had responded to my piece. She thought I should have simply responded, "Why aren't you home

cooking dinner?" She didn't think either my imagined obscenity or actual lie (I had told them my husband cooked on Wednesdays) was necessary. And, of course, she was right. They weren't necessary, in any abstract sense. But they had been necessary for me, for who I was at the time of the incident, stuck in the mire of my own uncertainties and insecurities.

"You know, your piece reminds me of "Unlearning To Not Speak," one woman said. What a hard thing that is to learn. It's no wonder we stammer and stutter in the process."

"No wonder at all," I said, and all the more reason we should reason and stammer and stutter together in the safe but invigorating atmosphere of the feminist classroom.